

Speech by Senator John F. Kennedy, Zionists of America Convention,  
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Prophecy is a Jewish tradition, and the World Zionist movement, in which all of you have played so important a role, has continued this tradition. It has turned the dreams of its leaders into acts of statesmanship. It has converted the hopes of the Jewish people into concrete facts of life.

When the first Zionist conference met in 1897, Palestine was a neglected wasteland. A few scattered Jewish colonies had resettled there, but they had come to die in the Holy Land, rather than to make it live again in greatness. Most of the governments of the world were indifferent.

But now all is changed. Israel became a triumphant and enduring reality exactly 50 years after Theodore Herzl, the prophet of Zionism, had proclaimed the ideal of nationhood. It was the classic case of an ancient dream finding a young leader, for Herzl was then only 37 years of age. Perhaps I may be allowed the observation that the Jewish people - ever since David slew Goliath - have never considered youth as a barrier to leadership, or measured experience and maturity by mere length of days.

I first saw Palestine in 1939. There the neglect and ruin left by centuries of Ottoman misrule were slowly being transformed by miracles of labor and sacrifice. But Palestine was still a land of promise in 1939, rather than a land of fulfillment. I returned in 1951 to see the grandeur of Israel. In 3 years this new state had opened its doors to 600,000 immigrants and refugees. Even while fighting for its own survival, Israel had given new hope to the persecuted and new dignity to the pattern of Jewish life. I left with the conviction that the United Nations may have conferred on Israel the credentials of nationhood; but its own idealism and courage, its own sacrifice and generosity, had earned the credentials of immortality.

Some do not agree. Three weeks ago I said in a public statement: "Israel is here to stay." The next day I was attacked by Cairo radio, rebuking me for my

faith in Israel, and quoting this criticism from the Arabic newspaper Al-Gomhouria:

As for the question of the existence and the nonexistence of Israel, Mr. Kennedy says that Israel has been created in order to exist. Time will judge between us, Mr. Kennedy.

I agree. Time will judge whether Israel will continue to exist. But I wish I could be as sure of all my prophecies as I am of my flat prediction that Israel is here to stay.

For Israel was not created in order to disappear - Israel will endure and flourish. It is the child of hope and the home of the brave. It can neither be broken by adversity nor demoralized by success. It carries the shield of democracy and it honors the sword of freedom; and no area of the world has ever had an overabundance of democracy and freedom.

It is worth remembering, too, that Israel is a cause that stands beyond the ordinary changes and chances of American public life. In our pluralistic society, it has not been a Jewish cause - any more than Irish independence was solely the concern of Americans of Irish descent. The ideals of Zionism have, in the last half century, been repeatedly endorsed by Presidents and Members of Congress from both parties. Friendship for Israel is not a partisan matter. It is a national commitment.

Yet within this tradition of friendship there is a special obligation on the Democratic Party. It was President Woodrow Wilson who forecast with prophetic wisdom the creation of a Jewish homeland. It was President Franklin Roosevelt who kept alive the hopes of Jewish redemption during the Nazi terror. It was President Harry Truman who first recognized the new State of Israel and gave it status in world affairs. And may I add that it would be my hope and my pledge to continue this Democratic tradition - and to be worthy of it.

What is needed now is leadership - impartial but firm, deliberate but bold -

leadership instead of rhetoric. There has been enough rhetoric in recent years about free transit through the Suez Canal - but there has been no leadership. Our policy in Washington and in the United Nations has permitted defiance of our pledge with impunity - indeed, with economic reward.

If America's word in the world community is to have meaning - if the mutual security amendment which I cosponsored with Senator Douglas is to have meaning - and if the clear, thoughtful language of the Democratic platform is to have meaning - the influence of this Nation and other maritime powers must be brought to bear on a just solution that removes all discrimination at the Suez Canal for all times. And the White House must take the lead.

We have also had much rhetoric in recent years about opposing an arms race and a solution by force in the Middle East. The rhetoric has not only been empty and negative. Even more fundamental is the premise that if the United States and the United Nations are to reject a solution based on force, then they must accept the task of finding a solution based on reason and justice.

We can no longer shun this task by pleading that the problem is too difficult. The danger is already acute from delay. Russia's position is more entrenched. The Arab States are more divided and restless. The influence of the Western nations has steadily diminished.

When I talked with Prime Minister Ben-Gurion on his most recent visit to this country, he told me of dangerous signs of unrest beneath the deceptive quiet that has fallen over the Middle East. For there is no peace in that region today - only an embittered truce between renewed alarms.

American intervention, on the other hand, will not now be easy for the record is not one to which we can point with pride:

The humble plea by the George Allen mission to Cairo, to urge Egyptian reconsideration of their acceptance of Soviet arms;

The series of incredible American blunders which led to the Suez crisis

of 1956, events in which the role of our Government has never been fully explained;

The so-called Eisenhower doctrine, now repudiated by some of the very nations which accepted our aid, and the cause even at that time of widespread antagonism from Middle Eastern leaders who felt we were cynically trying to use them for our own cold war ends;

And, in general, a deterioration in our relations with all Middle Eastern nations, primarily because neither Israel nor the Arabs knew exactly what to expect from us. At times it must have appeared to many in the area that the shortest route to Washington was through Moscow. At times it must have appeared that champions of democracy and freedom were being punished for their virtues, by being taken for granted by a neglectful administration that suddenly showed concern only when it was displeased by their conduct.

Peace in the Middle East is not one step nearer reality today than it was 8 years ago - but Russian influence is immeasurably greater.

What can a new President do? More weakness and timidity will not do. More stubborn errors redeemed at the last moment by impulsive action - will not do.

Now we must take the risk of leadership, and use our influence to compose this ugly situation before it breaks out in a new threat to peace. And I know we will not be alone in searching for a peaceful settlement - if our aims are high, and if they are centered solely on the genuine needs of the Middle East, and on an honorable end to these ancient quarrels.

First: I propose that the new President reaffirm our sincere friendship for all the peoples of the Middle East, whatever their religion or race or politics.

Second: I propose that we make it crystal clear that the United States means

what it said in the tripartite declaration of 1950 - that we will act promptly and decisively against any nation in the Middle East which attacks its neighbor. I propose that we make clear to both Israel and the Arab States our guarantee that we will act with whatever force and speed are necessary to halt any aggression by any nation. And to complete the effectiveness of this guarantee, I propose that we invite all like-minded nations to join with us in signing, registering, and depositing this declaration with the United Nations.

At present the tripartite declaration is too uncertain of execution and effect to be a useful shield for peace. With countries so close to one another in a sensitive tension-ridden area, a delay of only a few days in international reaction to aggression might well be fatal to a nation's freedom and indeed the peace of the entire world. Once the nations of the Middle East have a firm and precise guarantee, the need for continuing the arms race will disappear, the easing of tensions inevitably will follow, and both sides will be able to devote their energies and talents to peaceful pursuits.

Third: I propose that all the authority and prestige of the White House be used to call into conference the leaders of Israel and the Arab States to consider privately their common problems, assuring them that we support in full their aspirations for peace, unity, independence, and a better life - and that we are prepared to back up this moral support with economic and technical assistance.

The offer would be made with equal frankness to both sides; and all the world would be watching the response of each side. I sincerely believe that an American presidential initiative for peace, honestly intended and resolutely pursued, would not be lightly rejected by either side. And I promise to waste no time in taking this initiative.

For I have always believed that there is no real conflict or contradiction between the genuine aspirations of the Arab nations and the genuine aspirations of Israel. The Arab peoples rose to freedom and independence in

the very years which saw the rise of Israel. From the cooperation of these two awakened nationalisms could come a new golden age for the Middle East. But from their destructive vendetta can come nothing but misery and poverty and the risk of war.

The Middle East needs water, not war; tractors, not tanks; bread, not bombs. There is already little enough available in the way of financial and physical resources for either side to be devoting its energies to huge defense budgets. The present state of tensions serves only the worst interests of Arab and Israeli alike. But a new spirit of comity could well serve the highest ideals of both.

For the original Zionist philosophy has always maintained that the people of Israel would use their national genius not for selfish purposes but for the enrichment and glory of the entire Middle East. The earliest leaders of the Zionist movement spoke of a Jewish state which would have no military power and which would be content with victories of the spirit.

The compulsions of a harsh and inescapable necessity have compelled Israel to abandon this hope. But I cannot believe that Israel has any real desire to remain indefinitely a garrison state surrounded by fear and hate. And I cannot believe that the Arab world would not find a better basis for unity in a united attack on all their accumulated social problems - an attack in which they could benefit immensely from a closer cooperation with the people of Israel.

The technical skills and genius of Israel have already brought their blessings to Burma and to Ethiopia. Still other nations in Asia and in Africa are eager to benefit from the special skills available in that bustling land. Why should the Middle East alone be cut off from this partnership? And why should not the people of Israel receive the blessings available to them from association with the Arab world?

When we think of the possibilities of this association, an emotion of soaring hope replaces our somber anxieties about the Middle East. Ancient rivers would give their power to new industries. The desert would yield to

civilization. Disease would be eradicated, especially the disease that strikes down helpless children. The blight of poverty would be replaced by the blessings of abundance.

But it is a long and painful step from the era of the boycott to the era of partnership - and that step needs the direct encouragement and help of the White House. The next President of the United States should always be personally available to stimulate every experiment in cooperation, from the joint development of a river, to a reconsideration of the Arab refugee problem, to the crowning mercy of the final reconciliation that can be brought only by a true peace settlement.

Peace is our primary objective in the Middle East - and peace is partly our responsibility. "Seek peace, and pursue it" commands the psalmist. And that we must do. With open minds, open hearts, and the priceless asset of our American heritage, we shall seek peace in the Middle East, as elsewhere. And when history writes its verdict, let it be said that we pursued the peace with all the courage, all the strength, and all the resourcefulness at our command.

In this task, I ask for your assistance, your patience, your wisdom, and your support - until we can say to Jew and Arab alike "Peace be within thy walls and plenteousness within thy palaces. For my brethren and companions' sake, I will wish thee prosperity."

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